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House panel to vote on gas-mileage plan;
Experts differ on how best to set standards

MARILYN GEEWAX

Washington --- A House committee will vote today on a Bush administration request for more authority to set auto fuel economy standards, but critics are calling the measure inadequate.

Congress should attack the fuel-economy problem "very vigorously and aggressively," rather than taking "a minimalist approach," Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) said at a Senate Commerce subcommittee hearing on the White House proposal Tuesday.

Consumer advocates and some lawmakers say Congress should impose a fleet-wide standard averaging at least 33 miles per gallon by 2015, up from the current level of 27.5 mpg.

At the Senate hearing, Joan Claybrook, president of the public-interest organization Public Citizen, said she issued the 27.5 mpg standard in 1977 as a Transportation Department official. That goal was reached in 1985 but not raised since.

"If the car standard were an extremely reasonable 35 mpg today, we would save approximately 1.1 million barrels of oil each and every day," said Claybrook, who headed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration from 1977 to 1981.

Snowe said she and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) will introduce legislation requiring all autos to get an additional 10 mpg over the next decade.

In the House, Science Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.), and Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) are promoting a bill to mandate a 33-mpg corporate average fuel economy standard for all vehicles.

But House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Joe Barton (R-Texas) will urge his committee to instead approve legislation sought by President Bush to give NHTSA authority to change the structure of the CAFE program.

The bill doesn't spell out any new fuel-economy number, but the White House says a structural change in the program could lead to better mileage.

Under the existing system, the government sets a single average number for all passenger cars made by a particular manufacturer. That prompts automakers to produce some small cars to offset gas-guzzlers and get to an average fuel economy of at least 27.5 mpg.

Under Bush's proposed system, a car's fuel-economy requirement would be determined by a sliding scale that takes into account the different sizes of vehicles. Both big and small cars would have to become more efficient, but the standard could be less stringent for a heavier vehicle.

Some environmentalists dislike the proposal, saying it would encourage automakers to slightly increase vehicle sizes to fit into a lower CAFE bracket.

"Setting a fleet-wide target of 37 mpg in 10 years, while giving the president authority to reach that target through size-based standards, will save consumers money" while helping the economy, said David Friedman, Union of Concerned Scientists research director.

Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers President Frederick Webber said the industry trade group is wary of any government changes because "consumer purchases actually determine whether a manufacturer meets, exceeds or falls short of the standards."